

The University of Chicago

RITUAL STRATIFICATION IN
CHICAGO NEGRO CHURCHES

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

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RITUAL AND STRATIFICATION IN CHICAGO NEGRO CHURCHES

VATTEL ELBERT DANIEL

Wiley College, Marshall, Texas

I *Problem and Method.* Former studies of the church have not been concerned specifically with a natural and functional classification that shows just how the several types of churches differ in their relationship to social structure, social status, and social situation. They have been concerned mainly with general activities and with external aspects which yield statistical and ecological data,¹ but the functions which churches perform can be interpreted properly only when one realizes fully the nature of the social situations in which various types of worshippers find themselves. The following study shows that Negro churches perform a triple function. Not only do they enable the communicants to express their religious life, but they also enhance the morale of members of a subordinate racial class, and through differentiation in ritual, minister to various classes within the Negro population.

It is our hypothesis that religious ritual performs different functions for different classes within an urban American Negro population, while at the same time performing a function common to the entire class and one that is also common to all members of the particular denomination or sect with which the individual church is identified. In attempting to determine the relation of ritual and general church behavior in urban Negro churches to the part of the society in which these churches function, we have been concerned primarily with the church's function in the social adjustment of groups of persons. Hence, we have used the sermons, prayers, songs and behavior, in studying ceremonials and beliefs of types of communicants representing class and economic differences in urban Negro life. The types of ritual have been studied as indexes of the degree of adaptation to the social

¹ Extensive church studies have been made by H. Paul Douglass, Arthur E. Holt, Samuel C. Kincheloe, and those who have been trained by them. For studies of Negro urban churches, see Robert L. Sutherland, *An Analysis of Negro Churches in Chicago*, University of Chicago Doctor's Dissertation, 1930; George H. Hobart, *The Negro Churches of Manhattan, New York City*, New York, 1931; Paul W. Bare, *The Negro Churches in Philadelphia*, Drew University Master's thesis, 1931; Rothe Hilger, *The Religious Expression of the Negro*, Vanderbilt University Master's thesis, 1931; B. E. Mays and J. W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church*, New York, 1933; Edith Lockley, *The Negro Spiritualist Churches of Nashville*, Fisk University Master's thesis, 1935; Dan Dodson, *The Ethnic Church*, Southern University Master's thesis, 1936; Ida Rowland, *Study of Rituals and Ceremonies of Negroes in Omaha*, Omaha University Master's thesis, 1938; Raymond J. Jones, *A Comparative Study of Cult Behavior among Negroes*, Howard University Master's thesis, 1939. The theses of Hilger, Jones, and Lockley deal with religious expression of cults, although the church upon which Mr. Hilger's study is based belongs to an old-line denomination and Mr. Bare stresses particularly the churches of the store-front type. While Mr. Sutherland begins with a helpful classification, he does not base it primarily on ritual.

pressures that cause persons and groups to try to conform to the types of religious behavior characteristic of middle class and upper class white urban society.

We chose forty churches in that part of Chicago which has the densest Negro population, the selection being made so as to give the necessary distribution as to location, size, denomination, type of ritual, and social class of communicant. Personally instructed research assistants with observation guides obtained written reports of the services of these churches. As far as possible, four reports were received for each church, although not all of them were made by the same field worker. After studying these documents, the investigator made several trips to each church and prepared verbatim reports of the services. Particular attention was paid to anything in the sermons, prayers, hymns, and behavior that indicated the social pressures that were affecting the pastor or his people. When possible, special projects were assigned the assistants, and one of them made a case study of her own church.

After the observation documents were prepared, they were used to classify the churches as to ritual and ceremonial. This classification was based upon an analysis of the observation documents into ceremonial, emotional, and ideational elements. Then these types were compared with each other to determine the significance of the differences.

The investigator then interviewed the pastors to find out what they were attempting to do for the worshippers in the church services which they conducted, what were the problems of adjustment to urban life as they saw them, how they thought their type of ritual compared with other types, and what members should be interviewed to find out how successful the pastors were in obtaining their objectives. Particular note was made of statements referring to the class of people attending the churches and the reasons why certain classes of persons attended certain churches. Five thousand interviews² obtained from 1937 to 1939 were used to determine a class system of Negroes on Chicago's South Side. The general life of each class was then related to its life in the type of church which it frequented. An attempt has been made to show that type of ritual is a function of type of life in the part of the society in which one finds oneself.

II. Classification and Comparison of Ritual Types. The use of ritual as a key concept in the study of Negro church life has several advantages. Among them are the following: ritual can be objectively recorded; these records, instead of merely listing barren details, give portraits of an ideal-forming institution in action, featuring four types of worshippers, (1) the crowd that dances, (2) the group which indulges in demonstrative assent, (3) the congregation which prefers sermon-centered services, and (4) the

² From W.P.A. Project 3684, *Chicago Negro Community Study*.

church with formal liturgy. We have named these types of worshippers, (1) ecstatic sects or cults, (2) semidemonstrative groups, (3) deliberative churches, and (4) liturgical denominations.

In our classification of churches according to ritual and ceremonial, we have used the following criteria: emotional demonstrativeness; thought content of sermons; prayers; hymns; and the use of liturgy. We have kept in mind, however, that emotional demonstrativeness is not always crowd behavior in the extreme sense. When it is prescribed, expected action, it is a part of a type of ritual. In applying it as a criterion, we rated the actions of the worshippers in terms of the characteristics of the act. These characteristics of emotional demonstrativeness are frequency, intensity and speed, length or duration, and the number of persons participating. Thought content of ritual elements was studied or analyzed as to other-worldliness as opposed to emphasis upon current problems; conflict with established denominations as contrasted with a positive statement and application of doctrine; and reference to rural background and homely illustrations, rather than to facts of history and of general literature. The liturgy test was used to determine the opportunity for spontaneous action or the lack of such opportunity, because of the obligation of following a prescribed order of service adopted by the denomination. It soon became evident that there would be marginal cases that would have to be decided on the predominance of some particular type of behavior that would cause them to be placed in certain categories. In these cases, the opportunity for the exercise of emotional demonstrativeness, the use of this opportunity, and the frequency, intensity, duration, and universality of the demonstrations, were the deciding factors.

III. The Interpretation of Observation Documents. After classifying the churches as liturgical, deliberative, semidemonstrative, and ecstatic on the bases mentioned above, the observation documents were analyzed into ceremonial, emotional, and ideational elements, and a synthesis was made of those that were characteristic of each church type. The items listed in the analysis include equipment in relation to atmosphere for worship; the order of service, including the use of liturgy; sacerdotalism; types and themes of music and prayer; the message of the minister; formal invitations to join the church; the offering; and the presence and degree of emotional demonstrativeness.

In addition to the tables enumerating the churches according to denomination and giving the attendance according to ritual type, we prepared those showing liturgical orders of services; hymns of five liturgical services; sermons of five liturgical churches; sermons of fourteen deliberative churches; orders of the semidemonstrative services; hymns of twelve semidemonstrative services; sermons of twelve semidemonstrative services; ecstatic behavior in semidemonstrative services; order of the ecstatic services; hymns and songs of nine ecstatic services.

The synthesis of common elements in the ceremonials of liturgical churches is given in Table 1.

TABLE 1. RITUAL ELEMENTS OF FIVE LITURGICAL SERVICES

Classification	Elements
Equipment	Altars, candelabra with lighted candles, vestments, organs, hymn boards, prayer books, special hymnals; in some cases, shrines and stations of the cross; stained glass windows and statues add to the effect of the setting upon the worship; comfortable pulpit seats and pews.
Liturgy and Sacerdotalism	A rigidly prescribed ritual; activity of the priest predominates.
Hymn Themes	Adoration; better life; comfort; resurrection; absolution; communion.
Prayer Themes	Confession, absolution, consecration, oblation, implication, humble access, Thanksgiving; a prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church (<i>Kyrie Eleison</i>); prayer of Simeon (<i>Nunc Dimittis</i>).
Sermon Topics	"The Church and Fiery Trials"; "The Great Supper"; "The Holy Catholic Church"; "The Prayer of Consecration"; "Easter Day;" etc.

In differentiating liturgical churches from the other types, we stressed liturgy and sacerdotalism because these aspects have the greatest influence over the others.

Table 2 summarizes the elements analyzed from verbatim accounts of the deliberative service.

TABLE 2. ELEMENTS OF RITUAL IN FOURTEEN DELIBERATIVE CHURCHES

Classification	Elements
Equipment	Stained glass windows; vestments; vases of flowers; organs; hymn boards; special hymnals; collection plates or baskets.
Liturgy and Sacerdotalism	Formality without a great amount of liturgy; activity of the pastor shared by ministerial and lay assistants.
Hymn Themes	Desire for better life; adoration; working; fighting for the Lord.
Prayer Themes	Invocation; meditation; divine aid; daily life; church attendance; work; confession; absolution; consecration.
Sermon Topics	"The Triumphal Entry"; "Evidences of Life"; "Knowing God"; "Prayer"; "What Kind of Gospel Does Today Need?"; "Building a New World for God"; "The Miracle of Christ"; "Replenishment"; "Transfiguration"; "Dead Folks Walking Around"; "The Failure of the Church"; "Man"; "God's House"; "The Work of a Son."

The distinguishing phase of the deliberative church service is the sermon, and the others are usually planned with reference to it.

TABLE 3. ANALYSIS OF TWELVE SEMIDEMONSTRATIVE SERVICES

Classification	Elements
Equipment	Varies from stained glass windows to those covered with colored paper; vestments for two choirs, and uniforms for ushers; vases of flowers; organs or pianos or both; comfortable pulpit seats, with pews varying from the standardized type to both straight-back and folding chairs; collection plates or baskets.
Liturgy and Sacerdotalism	Even when an attempt is made to follow a definite order of service, there is a high degree of informality; not only is the activity of the pastors shared by official ministerial and lay assistants, but in many cases, any active member of the congregation may "raise" (or begin) a hymn or be called upon to lead in prayer.
Hymn Themes	Adoration; salvation; comfort; better life; joy; Heaven; faithfulness; prayer; and, less frequently, resignation, unity, work and death.
Prayer Pattern and Themes	Usually poetical prose with themes of invocation; confession; forgiveness; meditation; consecration; patience; mercy; and especially, supplication for aid to the preacher; church members and officers; the sick and distressed; those present as well as those absent.
Sermon Topics	"Wisdom"; "The Ten Virgins"; "The Peril of Knowing Too Much"; "Spiritual Mountain Climbing"; "A Great Experience"; "The Value of Knowing, Believing, and Trusting the Living God"; "An Invitation and Its Refusal"; "Love"; "None Given"; "The Folly of Our Excuses."
Emotional Lay Participation	Assents and shouts of approval in response to statements made by the minister in the sermon; running, dancing, and swooning during the sermon or immediately after it has been concluded; any of these patterns of behavior during the singing of a gospel song, spiritual, hymn, or a special number; crying or showing any evidences of emotion mentioned above at the time that a member of one's family or a close friend "becomes converted" in the church; "Amens" and other forms of assent during a fervent prayer.
Invitation and Reception of New Members	Techniques include the singing of an invitational hymn led by the choir and followed by the pastor's earnest entreaty, which is often related to the sermon theme and varies from a simple statement to a prolonged, persistent persuasion, or techniques calculated to cause embarrassment, emulation and fear to those who fail to respond positively.
Offerings and Usher Services	Preliminary offerings for missionary or benevolent purposes, and the main offering to provide income to pay church expenses; the latter offering is received in plates or baskets passed by highly regimented, neatly uniformed ushers who also function in seating the congregation.

Table 3 gives semidemonstrative patterns of public worship, which patterns are in sharp contrast to the formal ritual of the liturgical churches and the non-liturgical formality of the deliberative congregations.

In the semidemonstrative church much emphasis is placed upon the prayer pattern and themes, emotional lay participation, picturesque preaching, conspicuous offerings, and regimented usher service.

The greatest departure from the liturgical and deliberative church services is noted in Table 4 which classifies elements of worship of the ecstatic sects.

TABLE 4. ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP IN NINE ECSTATIC CULTS

Classification	Elements
Equipment	Varies from stained glass windows of edifices to painted or curtained show windows of stores; most of these have mottoes on the walls; some have vestments for choirs and ushers' blue armbands with gilt lettering; usually there is a vase of flowers and a piano together with other instruments of percussion, such as drums, tamborines, triangles and sometimes a wind instrument, usually a trumpet; comfortable pulpit seats with pews varying from the standardized type to both straight-back and folding chairs; collection plates or baskets.
Liturgy and Sacerdotalism (or their opposites)	A high degree of informality; even when a special ritual is followed, it is highly theatrical and it is recognized by rapid and rhythmic movement; at times, in some of the cults, the ecstasy becomes so great that pandemonium reigns.
Hymn Themes	Comfort; ecstasy and holiness; Heaven; salvation; adoration; loyalty; steadfastness.
Prayer Ritual and Themes	Two sects use the Lord's Prayer only. In one of these, all stand with raised hands and little fingers interlocked, repeating the Prayer in unison. In a third cult, the entire congregation, standing with hands raised, pray rapidly, loudly, and differently. Some of the prayers are conventional in type, and include the following: Invocation; Divine Aid; Adoration; Confession; Absolution; Consecration.
Sermon Patterns and Topics	Some conventional sermons and themes, but usually the sermons are simply pastoral expositions of scripture passages read by members of the congregation, a verse at a time. The principal emphases are sexual sins and their consequences; healing by fasting and prayer; God helps the poor.
Emotional Lay Participation	Varies from verbal assents to a state of ecstasy in which each member "receives the Holy Ghost." The saint-making ritual is sometimes used for making believers "saints." In most cases, the frenzy includes yelling, tapping, stamping, shouting, and, in some instances, running and jumping, including the type which resembles the movements of a jumping jack. Loud praying while standing with hands uplifted, and speaking in tongues while in a similar position constitute the climax of the ecstatic behavior, although this was not so prevalent as were the rhythmic hand-clapping and foot-patting.

TABLE 4 (continued)

Classification	Elements
Special Aspects of Cult Rituals	The hand-raising ceremony, in which the right hand is raised, sometimes both hands, as devotees pray loudly; speaking in tongues, in which the believers repeat rapidly and loudly unintelligible symbols; footwashing, which is the final ceremony in admitting members received into the cult; healing ritual, in which the sick are anointed with oil and surrounded by a praying, singing, and dancing group; saint-making ritual, in which believers are supposed to receive the Holy Ghost, after white-robed saints kneel with them and pray loudly, accompanied by rapidly repeated rhythmical assent, while the pianist plays a revival hymn; baptizing of sacred objects—at the end of a regular baptismal service, members bring sacred objects which are also baptized and blessed.
Testimony Stereotypes	Many believers of the church find stereotyped expression in lay testimony. Conceptions include those of praising the Lord because He is risen; of thanking Him for providing for every need; of the old-time religion as the religion of exhilaration; of faith-healing; and of the second advent, or of "soon" coming of Jesus.

IV. Ritual, Belief, and Social Situation. 1. The Traditional Negro Church. It is not sufficient simply to describe the liturgical, deliberative, semidemonstrative, and ecstatic services in urban Negro churches, for "if we are to have a sociology of religion, it must come through observation of religion in action among other social forces."³ Since one of the important functions of these churches is to minister to various classes within the racial group through differentiation in ritual, it was necessary for the investigator to study these classes of persons representing different types of social participation based upon economic life, family background, education, and other factors. In doing this, he found that the function of religious ritual in the life of the urban Negro varies according to the class with which the worshipper is identified.

The traditional Negro church followed a ritual quite similar to that designated as semidemonstrative, but the emotional and cultural advancement of the urban Negro led to the establishment and development of liturgical and deliberative churches. Not only did some of the liturgical churches become more ritualistic and some of the deliberative churches more sedate, but even some of the old-line denominations adopted a formal ceremonial which left many migrants from the rural South after 1916 with a feeling that they

³ Arthur E. Holt, "Case Records as Data for Studying the Conditioning of Religious Experience by Social Factors," *Amer. J. Sociol.*, Sept. 1926, 227-236 (quotation is from page 227).

were not at home in them. Therefore, they developed pentecostal, spiritual, and spiritualist churches in which they celebrated the Christian tradition with an abandon which led to an ecstasy that had a more satisfactory effect upon them.

2. *Negro Classes and Life in the Church.* Passing over the superficial, commonsense criteria of class based on appearance and manner of speech, we have used occupation, income, consumption, education, philosophy of life, pattern of behavior, associational activity, and family life as bases for grouping. The upper class includes the leading business men and women, statesmen and politicians, as well as the professional class. The professional class comprises not only physicians, ministers, and attorneys, but also dentists, pharmacists, editors, teachers, librarians, social service workers, engineers, architects, and concert artists. The business class consists of insurance company executives and other important enterprisers. Statesmen and politicians may be differentiated as congressmen, state legislators, aldermen, ward committeemen, although some of the latter are in lower groups.

The most important elements in upper class status are found in activities which are not centered in the church. Thus, church-going is not an important activity for many persons of the upper stratum. Except in the cases of those who belong to middle class or lower class churches for business reasons upper class persons who attend church regularly are inclined to devote themselves to those of the ritualistic or of the deliberative type, and largely to Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches, which churches have become known as the churches of the social elite. Generally speaking, upper class behavior means manifesting self-control.

The upper middle class is characterized by conservatism, conformity, thrift, industry, and ambition. The upper middle class person is deeply interested in civic affairs, particularly those which affect his racial class. His participation is noted for its sincerity and dependability and he does much of the work for which upper class leaders receive credit. In this class are placed the less successful professional and business men and women, minor executives, government employees, the more advanced clerical workers, and important politicians who do not qualify for higher status. While the personal service types have been lowered in the social scale, government employees (and more specifically postal employees), because of income, education, and other factors, have moved steadily upward. The upper middle class shows the greatest variety in church as well as in associational interests. It frequents the Congregational, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and some of the Methodist and Baptist churches. It is quite similar to the upper class in its choice of ritual and ceremony, but is more faithful in attendance. This attendance is often for social reasons as well as for spiritual uplift, since some of the recreation of the older group is organized under the auspices of the church.

Differences between the upper and lower middle classes are those of point of view, family connection, education, and occupational status. Occupations indicative of lower middle class status are tailor, waiter, orderly, houseman, bellman, hair-dresser, dressmaker, sales clerk, barber, cashier, worker in one of the industries, and in some cases, domestic service. In the lower middle class, we have the strongest supporters of the semidemonstrative churches, large and small. Those who can do so, often join the larger churches because of their prestige, while persons with little money are more comfortable in the smaller Baptist and Methodist churches. On the other hand, there are both respectables and non-respectables who consider deep religious devotion a symbol of lower class status, and religion an "opiate" foisted on them by the upper classes of the larger society, and thus seek to show their urbanity and freedom, sometimes by indifference and nonparticipation, and at other times by open resentment. Opposed to this attitude of the heretic, that of the devotee evidences almost a blind belief in God's power to rectify immoral conditions without the conscious mediation of man.

The most distinguishing marks of the lower class are low income and low educational status, with all these imply. Two implications are poor environment and poor ways of conducting oneself. Because the economic depression has reduced persons of various classes to a relief status, crudity and ignorance, indicative of lack of gentility or of poor ways of conducting oneself may well be chosen as criteria. Since this class comprises marginal workers, consisting mainly of common laborers and domestic servants, it furnishes the majority of unemployed persons and relief clients, since too large a percentage of the meager income has been spent for certain items of furniture (an aspect of conspicuous consumption), for food and liquor, or for other media of dissipation. There is practically no associational life among lower class men, while lower class women of the respectable type find their most satisfying associational contacts in church clubs. Yet some associational relationships are afforded by labor unions, by clubs of migrants from the same southern states, and by protest groups among the unemployed. There are two contrasting attitudes toward religion and the church on the part of those in the lowest class. Some persons are antagonistic and condemnatory, even blasphemous. Others are religious devotees who put to shame the average church-goer of the upper and middle classes. Many of these manifest a high standard of morality, and have their associational and leisure time activity within the church. Members of this category are found in large numbers in the Baptist, Pentecostal, and Spiritual congregations. Since the beginning of the depression, those of the lower class who have been recipients of the charity of the Catholics, have often become interested also in their ritual, but the most frequent lower class religious group is a sect, characterized by emotional demonstrativeness, and usually housed in a storefront building.

Summary. Former studies of the church have not been concerned specifically with a natural and functional classification that shows just how the several types of churches differ in their relationship to social structure, social status, and social situation. In this study, we have made such a classification and have found through an analysis of the type of life lived outside the church, that the type of ritual engaged in, reflects the life of the society of which the worshipper is a member. The social nature of the bizarre behavior of the ecstatic sects prevents that type of isolation that accentuates inferiority and takes the devotee into a world where temporarily he can live above the handicaps of everyday life. The congenial informality of the semi-demonstrative church groups affords fellowship, personal recognition, and tension release, so consoling to the former ruralite in the urban situation. The members of the deliberative and of the liturgical churches seem already to have adjusted themselves to city life and their church services stress meeting squarely the issues of life rather than seeking escape through emotional release.

In determining the relation of ritual and general church behavior in urban Negro churches to various classes within the Negro group, we have been concerned primarily with the part which types of churches play in the social adjustment of types of persons. Hence we have used the sermons, prayers, songs, and behavior in studying the ceremonials and beliefs of types of communicants representing class and economic differences in urban Negro life. The functions which churches perform for Negroes can be interpreted properly only when one realizes fully the nature of the social situations in which Negroes of different social status find themselves in the social structure of our nation. These churches serve a triple function. Not only do they enable the communicants to celebrate the Christian triumph, but they also render a distinct service to them as members of a minority group, and through differentiation in ritual, they minister to various classes within this group. As Holt has said:

There is an intimate relationship between personal feeling of success or failure and the social situation in which the individual is living. There is a close relationship between personal feeling of depression or exaltation and the prevailing type of religion in which the individual is participating. . . . If we are to have a sociology of religion, it must come through observation of religion in action among other social forces.⁴

⁴ Arthur E. Holt, *op. cit.*, 227.

